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ABSTRACT

College composition teachers face serious difficulties with student anger in trying to teach writing to poorly prepared students who do not see the need for learning standard English. Most teachers would agree that they are trying to teach writing in a much harsher, less receptive climate produced by powerful social forces over which they have little control. The new intensity of students' anger comes from a population that is waking up from the American Dream. Some guidelines for teacher response are: (1) expect anger; (2) do not assume that the value of what is being taught is self-evident; (3) acknowledge the arbitrary nature of accepted language use; (4) establish a consistent and trustworthy authority; and (5) keep in mind the difficulty of learning standard English. (CR)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Standard English and Student Anger

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I

dramatic it winter, my junior-level college composition class was the scene of a rather the tem ncident: a mini-rebellion against Standard English. About three weeks into her tem nst before the first set of papers was returned, a clearly unhappy student lost English, in class, exclaiming that (1) she didn't see why she has to learn Standard cons dbo Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* simply reflects Hacker's personal opincurrent the English language, and (3) perhaps I, the teacher, am just too old to know suppose glish usage. (Ouch.) Three other students, though much more tentative, English this student on the first point: they didn't see the need for learning Standard

unhapp ring the conferences that were scheduled that week, I was able to get at my her hav tudent's deeper problems, and over time two others apologized, individually, really g disrupted the class with their frustration. By midterm, attitudes were gen- of the c d, with my formerly unhappy student now one of the best performers and most of the rs at least comfortable with, if not enthusiastic about, class goals. At the end wrote n, students gave the class a high rating in their evaluations, and some even one stu ns of gratitude for my rigor and my patience with their resistance. But sadly, she con t never did accept having to learn new skills. On her evaluation she wrote that teacher n't understand why, if her writing had been standard enough for her previous t suddenly wasn't standard enough for me.

py end ough this little drama offers, from a teacher's perspective, a relatively hap- is hardl it has sufficient tragedy to warrant some pedagogical reflection. Of course, it teach w news that upper-level composition teachers face serious difficulties in trying to ing to poorly prepared students or that students become angry about having to

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do work they consider remedial or unnecessary. The job of informing some young men and women, a year or two before graduation and the search for jobs, that they lack crucial literacy skills has never been a pleasant one. Even consummate tact cannot make up for the brutality of the underlying message: though your education should have prepared you as a writer, it has not--you have a lot of work to do and little time in which to do it.

What *is* new, I think, is the *intensity* of student anger and resistance. The account above offers a somewhat bland example of what is now going on in many composition classrooms--several of my colleagues have had to negotiate situations far more painful and nasty, some without hope for resolution. Most would agree that we are trying to teach writing in a much harsher, much less receptive climate, a climate produced by powerful social forces over which, as individual teachers, we have little control. The media bemoan the "new incivility," the current political mood is unfriendly to higher education, and the convulsions of late capitalism (downsizing, exporting jobs abroad, mega-mergers and their concomitant layoffs) make all the old inducements for educating oneself (self-improvement, self-advancement, a chance to better the world) look hopelessly naive. Postwar optimism, having peaked in the ideals of the sixties and dwindled in the desperate hedonism of the eighties, has largely disappeared, along with the fierce Cold War competition that fueled many of our educational programs and policies.

Though I don't accept the Generation X stereotypes, I can see that many of the twenty-somethings in my composition classes are not highly motivated. They know that countless graduates are unemployed, that some are living with their parents, that a number are languishing in stopgap jobs that do not reflect their educational level or abilities. As one young woman told me, she doesn't see that there is much to look forward to after college. Without hopes and dreams, she finds it difficult to get excited about her chosen major, much less a required course in composition. Some students, upon learning that their writing needs work, feel a double resentment toward their previous instructors: these educators have failed to educate, and they are sitting pretty in positions of security and authority that are beyond the reach of the current generation. Still others, associating Standard English with an elite culture whose doors they believe will remain closed to them, protest that what they know already is good enough.

The anger that I'm talking about, then, is something that, for the middle-class white students who make up the large majority of my classes at Ohio University, is

culturally new. It is not the anger induced by inappropriate teaching behavior--habits of humiliating, impatience, favoritism, exercising power for its own sake, belittling student efforts, sexual harassment, jokes at student expense, sarcasm, tirades, ambush quizzes, and so forth. And it is not the anger that stems from students' personal problems, personality disorders, or previous bad experiences in the classroom. The new anger, though sometimes concurrent with the old, is specific to recent ideological and socioeconomic trends--that is, it is specific to a population that is waking up from the American Dream.

Given the effects of this disturbing cultural transition, what are composition teachers to do? How should teaching practices change, if at all, to address this new form of student alienation?

While it continues to be true that a teacher who is enthusiastic, rigorous, and patient can expect to have fewer classroom problems than a teacher who is not, it has become clear to many of us that these qualities alone cannot fully dispel contemporary student discontent. My own response to changing attitudes has been to beef up tried-and-true classroom methods and to introduce a few new practices. Some are intended to persuade students that good writing skills are socially essential; some indicate that I acknowledge and understand the social difficulties that college students now face; others are simply a matter of common sense for troubled times. Since last winter's dramatic scene, I have taught myself to approach the composition classroom according to the following guidelines.

• Expect anger.

The current generation of students has a lot to be angry about, and many lack the skills to deploy that anger appropriately or effectively. Don't ignore anger or dismiss it; don't take it personally, and don't return it. Manage angry discussion of student frustrations calmly and in a spirit of inquiry, and, if necessary, set up individual student conferences for a later date to provide some cooling-off time.

• Do not assume that the value of what we teach is self-evident.

It is helpful to remind students that English is a global language. As Sidney Greenbaum points out in *Good English and the Grammarian* (Longman: London and New York, 1988), about 300 million people speak English as a native tongue; another 300 million speak English as a second language; it is the official language, or one of the official languages, of at least 25 countries; it is the primary language "for international

communications for commerce and tourism, for science and technology, for economic a
military aid, for air-traffic control, and for communication at sea. The extent to wh
English functions as an international language is unique in world history" (p. 2).

Explain that, in order to be functional at a global level, a language has to
standardized--that is, it must be understandable when it is removed from its immedi
context, when it is apprehended at a distance and at a later time. Demonstrate th
while nonstandard usage is more suitable for some situations, Standard English is
essential communication tool, as it is the version of English that can be understood by t
greatest number of people around the world.

Do not present Standard English as though it were a superior dialect. Rath
identify it straightforwardly as a privileged, white, middle-class dialect to be added
one's repertoire of incalculably useful social skills, whatever one's own social identity.

Point out that many media in the culture do not use standard English but spec
dialects, and that students can expect to find nonstandard English in newspape
magazines, television, etc. Make it clear that nonstandard English is sometimes appr
priate for these media, but bring in examples of instances in which it is not--includi
examples in which nonstandard English has generated unintended (comic) meanin
("Running down the stairs, Linda's nose was red and raw.") Demonstrate how a know
edge of Standard English can leave one less open to being misunderstood or ridiculed
dismissed.

• Acknowledge the arbitrary nature of accepted language use.

Warn students that, while many Standard English constructions seem logical a
consistent with one another, some of those that have been established primarily throu
historical habit may contradict our expectations. Show how linguistic evolution h
generated some ambivalence within Standard English, such that a writer may cho
whether or not to capitalize the first word of an independent clause following a col
whether or not to use a comma after a coordinating conjunction when the combi
sentences are brief, whether to spell a color name "gray" or "grey," and so forth.

Suggest that a living, changing language system is sometimes quite unsystema
that some of its irregular forms represent the collective preferences of speakers a
writers who came before us.

Prepare students for minor differences in usage in different professional contex

for example, the journalist's preference for omitting the comma between the last two items in a series versus the composition teacher's preference for retaining the comma in order to prevent ambiguity.

• **Establish a consistent and trustworthy authority.**

Without criticizing their previous training, explain to students that, given the complexity of the writing process, not all composition classes can fully address the complexity of Standard English. Suggest that, at this level, many of the simple rules they may have learned earlier--"put a comma where you pause"; "never use 'I'"--must now give way to a more sophisticated understanding.

Provide a good handbook/workbook that has been thoroughly examined for errors, typos, and passages where practice contradicts prescription. (Rare is the textbook that is without these, and students are quick to anger when they perceive a double standard.) At the beginning of the course, thumb through the books in class and have students make corrections as necessary.

Supplement inadequate textbook explanations (restrictive versus nonrestrictive, for one, is seldom made comprehensible) with clear written commentary and example.

• **Keep in mind the difficulty of learning Standard English.**

Remember that students are effectively learning a foreign language, one that is particularly difficult to assimilate because it has so much in common with the language of everyday speech.

Understand that most students have little comprehension of the terms with which composition teachers talk about Standard English, the technical vocabulary with which we try to explain what is standard and what is not. Like dictionaries, most teachers and textbooks tend to explain terms with other terms, in circular fashion. To help students become familiar with composition terms, write them out ("parallelism," "dangling modifier," "run-on sentence") when correcting papers and refer to handbook page numbers so that students can review correct usage. Keep vocabulary as simple as possible: where there are multiple labels for the same feature (as in "subordinate clause" and "dependent clause"), choose one and stick with it ("subordinate clause" *or* "dependent clause").

Will these strategies guarantee a peaceful composition class? In the current social climate, there are no guarantees--and I believe that anger is frequently a sane and

legitimate response to the frustrations that students face in our beleaguered educational system. Meanwhile, my efforts to understand their anger and to diffuse its potentially harmful effects in the classroom seem to be working. There have been no further outbursts, and the general consensus in my classes now is that Standard English is an annoying but necessary evil. While none of my students may swoon over the beauty and rhythm of a well-turned phrase, neither do they refuse to try to write one. At the least, they are developing some of the skills they will need in order to articulate their frustration more effectively--and, I would hope, to persuade others of the need for constructive cultural change.